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Internal Mobility: A Review and Agenda for Future Research

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email: cahrs@cornell.edu
website: www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs

INTERNAL MOBILITY: A REVIEW AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Many, perhaps most, organizations rely on internal mobility – transfers and promotions – to fill a significant portion of their job openings. Which, in turn, has led to a wealth of research on these topics. Professor Ray provides a comprehensive review of this research (some 202 articles in all), emphasizing what we know, but also what we don't. written mainly for researchers, the review is chock full of findings directly relevant to practitioners as well. here are just a few examples.

Transfers. Of interest here are the when, where, and how of transfers, as well as their individual and organizational implications. For example:

- Most transfers are done via informal contacts or job posting systems; the former are more common, but the latter work better. Primarily because they provide more information about job-seekers' and hiring managers, thus improving the quality of decisions on both side of the equation.

- Transfers have both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, they can improve employee affect, while decreasing absenteeism and improving unit performance. But this isn't automatic. They can also put additional pressures on transferees, possibly leading to burnout and a reduced organizational commitment.

- This suggests that post-transfer recovery efforts are crucial and that the assimilation of transfers into their new units should not be overlooked. In part, it may be necessary to update their knowledge, skills, and abilities to fit the requirements of the new jobs. But it also will be essential aid the socialization process by assisting them in adapting to the vagaries of their new milieus.

- Non-movers need attention, too. Transfers are most common among low and high performing employees. Which can leave managers over-reliant on a stable core of embedded average performers who are indispensable, but also in need of care and feeding to stay engaged.

- Notwithstanding the many challenges, units that transfer-in more employees out-perform those that transfer-in fewer on a host of important outcomes, including employee satisfaction, absenteeism, customer satisfaction, innovation, and overall competitiveness.

Promotions. Research in this vein centers primarily on the specifics of selection for upward movement, and to a lesser extent on the outcomes that follow.

Selection. Studies show that, in general, meritocracy is alive and well. Most promotions go to high performers with high potential. But not all.

- Too often stereotypes and biases intervene. It's been known for a long time that the likelihood of promotion is significantly influenced by age, race, gender, and sexual orientation, despite legislation to the contrary. Research has also shown evidence of "pretty privilege" – where individuals deemed physically attractive are more likely than others to move up the ranks.

- Further, some decision-makers cling to the notion that women are societally and genetically unfit for the demands of higher-level positions. Consequently, even women who outperform men are downgraded on potential, and, thus, experience fewer promotions than they objectively should.

- There is research to suggest that many of these biases can be overcome by adopting standardized selection processes and procedures

- And then there are the games people play. Promotion rates are associated with personality characteristics such as ambition, proactivity, and extraversion. Which can be a good thing. But not always. Overly-ambitious employees sometimes proactively engage their extraversion to aggressively network and curry favor with key decision-makers, who, in turn, grease the skids for their upward climbs, qualifications notwithstanding.

Outcomes. Promotions are usually seen as pluses for individuals and organizations.

- They generally reduce turnover among recipients. But not when the moves are accompanied by paltry pay increases. Highly visible, disgruntled employees are rich targets for headhunters. Further, promotions clearly increase turnover among those not chosen. But less so when they are convinced that the decisions were fair (e.g., not rash or biased) and that their days will come (assuming, of course, it's true).

- Following promotions, successful candidates can be expected to experience a performance decline in their new jobs – for a while. It takes time to adapt to new environments and get up to speed on more demanding jobs. Again, it pays to invest in quality orientation and training. Other things equal, individuals who are promoted from inside adapt faster and perform better than those who are hired from outside.

Where to go from here. Researchers have learned a lot about internal mobility over the years, but much remains to be done (17 specific topics for study are detailed in the article). Practitioners aren't always aware of, or at least don't apply, the available knowledge, but then again know things that researchers don't. More dialogue is clearly in order, as is a collaborative research agenda aimed at the challenges inherent in an increasingly dynamic world of work.

This ResearchBrief by the following author is based on the paper in the Journal of Management: Internal Mobility: A Review and Agenda for Future Research

Caitlin Ray
Assistant Professor, Human Resource Studies
ILR School
Cornell University

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